

Q&A

COLONEL ROBERT McDOWELL

Commander, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne)
Commander, Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines



COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR BRIAN K. JOHNSON

Command Sergeant Major, 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne)
Command Sergeant Major, Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines

The 1st Special Forces Group (Airborne), located at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., is regionally aligned with the U.S. Pacific Command and has two forward deployed elements, the 1st Battalion, 1st SFG (A) at Torii Station, Okinawa, and Special Forces Detachment-39 at Songnam, Korea.

In June 2012, Col. Robert McDowell took command of the 1st SFG(A). McDowell is currently serving as the group commander and the Commander, Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines. McDowell's previous key assignments in the Special Forces community were with the 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), the 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne) and at the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, where he served as the Deputy Commander, 1st Special Warfare Training Group and as the Director, Directorate of Training and Doctrine.

Command Sgt. Maj. Brian K. Johnson, 1st SFG (A) and the JSOTF-P, has a wealth of experience in the Pacific Command area of operations and has served in 1st SFG(A) for more than 15 years of his career. Johnson's recent key assignments were as the battalion command sergeant major for SWCS's 1st and 2nd Battalions, 1st SWTG (A) and as the Battalion Command Sgt. Maj. 1st Battalion 1st Special Forces Group (A) in Okinawa, Japan.

The 1st SFG(A) is currently deployed in more than 11 countries this quarter, has forces serving

in Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines and Operation Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan and is the lead operational special-operations forces element for two Joint Chief of Staff exercises in the AOR that are scheduled for execution in February and March.

For 10 days in November, *Special Warfare* had the opportunity to be on the ground with the command and the men of the 1st SFG(A) in the Philippines and then visit them at their home station in Washington as they prepared for follow on missions to the PACOM and CENTCOM AORs. The following Q&A was developed throughout the course of the visit and touches on a variety of topics from the overall mission in the PACOM AOR to the traditional advisory role of Special Forces and the quiet success of Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines.

SW: The 1st Special Forces Group has a lot of irons in the fire. Does it become difficult to prioritize the long list of priorities you are assigned?

McDowell: Not at all. There is no question that the job is 24/7. We have Soldiers serving in Afghanistan as part of OEF-A, in the Philippines as part of OEF-P and we have the majority of the load for SOF in Asia. The professionals serving in this group make it very easy to serve several masters. The vision and intent that we get from the Special Operations Command Pacific and the Special Operations of Korean is synchronized

to ensure we are maximizing the potential of the group while remaining very meticulous in those times that we have to over-extend our force for the most critical of surge operations. In just the past 90 days we have executed detailed theater campaign planning with both SOCKOR and SOCPAC that has resulted in a prioritization of efforts. We have ensured our actions support the theater campaign plan of the PACOM Commander and we have leaned forward in helping U.S. Special Operations Command develop the Global SOF Campaign.

SW: What is your biggest challenge with having to operate in the largest AOR?

McDowell: Within the PACOM AOR, there are 36 nations for which we are responsible. The force is finite and thus the biggest challenge is ensuring we do more than just meet the large demand signal placed on us by the commanders of SOCPAC and SOCKOR. The leaders in the 1st SFG(A) have to ensure that we have an adequate amount of time to train and prepare to ensure we remain ready to operate in the most expansive Human Domain that any Special Forces group will encounter. To ensure success, we spend a considerable amount of time and effort balancing long range commitments, maintaining a daily dialogue with our theater SOCs to properly address any and all emerging topics and we deliberately focus on finding time for our Soldiers to train.

SW: The sheer size of your operational environment carries with it diverse cultures and languages. How do you meet the diversity that is demanded from your force?

McDowell: What is unique to the 1st SFG(A) mission in PACOM is our requirement and our ability to maintain such a broad cultural astuteness and language capability. We know that we have to have the language and knowledge that makes us operational and connected the moment we arrive anywhere in the theater. One of our biggest challenges is language because we have such a diversity of languages in the AOR. There are many times that we might only have one individual that is qualified in the target language of the country we are operating in, but we compensate for this by ensuring the remainder of the team learns key phrases and words while developing a very strong appreciation of the culture and nuances of that particular country. Our cultural awareness is an area that we constantly have the opportunity to capitalize on due to the diversity of our deployments. I believe we have more opportunity to develop this cultural knowledge than do the Soldiers serving in the other groups.

SW: In looking at the ongoing missions in PACOM, there appears to be a very connected relationship between the 1st SFG(A), the Civil Affairs and Military Information Support Operations teams that work in region. How has that relationship developed?

Johnson: When you look at what we are doing and how everyone's contribution builds a synergistic effect, you easily come to realize that if you take out one piece of the equation the whole mission suffers. PACOM has every conflicting ideology in existence and there are numerous flash points in this AOR alone. It is important to understand that the wrong action or the wrong message can either make you alienated from a key partner or it can set conditions that foster a lack of trust. So when you mention CA and MISO and how they work with the 1st SFG(A), we can confidently say that it is a combined effort.

McDowell: The recent typhoon in the Philippines is a great example of how we pulled together multiple capabilities to obtain a successful outcome. The employment of Special Forces assessment teams provided the eyes and ears for the Ambassador, the Commander of PACOM and the JTF Commander; these teams consisted of SF and CA Soldiers, and at key locations we had combat camera and MISO Soldiers. The combat camera and MISO Soldiers helped capture and project critical messages while the CA Soldiers helped local government units get operational again. The SF Soldiers provided a tactical and strategic picture of the activity



TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS Col. Robert McDowell (right) works with his operations officer to move JSOTF-P assets to support typhoon relief efforts while in flight to visit JSOTF-P Soldiers conducting a JCET in Subic Bay, Philippines. Providing response for emergency situations requires balance of personnel and equipment between ongoing JSOTF-P operations and the crisis. *U.S. Army photo*

on the ground that was needed to ensure aid was delivered to the right places and the mechanisms for the delivery of that aid were in place.

SW: Unlike the CENTCOM AOR, PACOM does not have any active lethal engagements, which leaves 1st SFG(A) working in the historic role of Special Forces advisers. Has this affected the readiness of the group and its ability to execute surgical strike operations?

McDowell: I would like to say that this probably postures the 1st SFG(A) to be the most ready of all the groups to execute both special warfare and surgical strike operations. We maintain a battalion focused on surgical strike and three battalions focused on special warfare. We are deployed constantly in the AOR conducting advise and assist operations in both of the above disciplines. Prior to joining the ranks of the 1st SFG(A) I had the opportunity to jump with the SWCS's Special Warfare Medical Group and spend some time talking with a few of the Soldiers who had previously been assigned to the 1st SFG(A). Since the jump was delayed due to weather, we had a lot of time to sit and talk on the drop zone. One of the young sergeants on the jump had just finished a four-year assignment to 1st SFG(A). He had served in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as OEF-P and on a multitude of TSCP events. He was a guy who raised his hand to go on every mission and was a great example of what our Special Forces Soldiers were doing in and out of combat.

What was interesting about the conversation is that the only things he would talk freely about were things that he had done in Iraq and in Afghanistan. It seemed that in order to validate his role as a Special Forces Soldier, he had to discuss the lethal aspect of his chosen profession. It was hard to fault him; for the past decade the media has focused on the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. There had been very little attention paid to the actions being executed throughout Asia that were ensuring we stayed ahead of those adversaries that were setting the conditions for anti access/area denial of the most vital region in the world. When I did get him and the others to talk about OEF-P, JCETs and other activities, now encapsulated under special warfare, that they conducted in PACOM, the first comment back to me was, "That's just training, it's not combat."

He was trying to make a distinction between what he was doing in the PACOM AOR and what he was doing in Afghanistan and Iraq. When I got him to talk about the JCETs, the countries he had been to, the OEF-P mission, I think it was the first time he was able to realize that what he was doing in those missions, was the classic Special Forces mission. It's what we do better than anyone else. It's where Lt. Gen. (Charles) Cleveland has envisioned us operating in the Human Domain, executing Special Warfare and prepared to execute surgical strike. It's what the 1st SFG(A) has never lost the capability to do and what we have leveraged to make ourselves



JOINT TRAINING Col. Robert McDowell talks with an officer whose troops were conducting sniper training with members of JSOTF-P at Fort Magsaysay, Philippines. *U.S. Army photo.*

successful when dealing with indigenous combat forces in OEF-A and OIF.

So, while Afghanistan and Iraq have been ongoing for more than a decade, the 1st SFG(A) never lost the skills required to conduct special warfare operations and the understanding of what the Human Domain is. As a force, the Soldiers of 1st SFG(A) have continued to operate as singletons in Asia, they have continued to do JCETs, they have continued to execute OEF-P with absolute success, and they have been highly successful in every OEF-A and OIF rotation that the U.S. Army Special Forces Command (A) commanding general has directed us to execute. To a 1st SFG(A) Soldier, the execution of special warfare is just doing 'day-to-day' business. As the commander, I think that they are comfortable wading into uncertainty and bring success from chaos and capability from the willing. So when a 1st SFG(A) Soldier does take on the combat mission, he takes all of those skills that he employs on a daily basis in the execution of special warfare and finds it very easy to lead an indigenous force into combat. Understanding how to operate with and through others comes naturally to the 1st SFG(A) Soldier.

Johnson: When Operations Enduring Freedom-Afghanistan and Iraq kicked off — and even back in Desert Shield — 1st SFG(A) guys were told to hold fast. We were told, "You have Korea over there that can kick-off at any minute." It was always a motivating factor because we wanted to get into 'the fight'; because, whether we admit it or not, that's

what we all came to do. When 1st SFG(A) Soldiers did get the opportunity to begin rotating into 'the fight', it was noted by numerous senior leaders that they were very comfortable working through and with others and bringing the most out of the host nation. It is a natural tendency for a warrior to want to take charge, get on point and eliminate the enemy; what is unique about Special Forces is that we are supposed to get others to do the majority of that work. When the 1st SFG(A) Soldiers stepped in, we felt right at home developing capacity and capability and we readily welcomed the challenge to train, advise and assist the host-nation warriors to take the fight to the enemy. We showed them how and then let them do it, and in doing so, we left them with an increased capability; just like we do every day in the PACOM AOR and what we have done amazingly well in OEF-P.

Being able to combine the skills that are required to operate through and with others is what our regiment needs us to do in the execution of special warfare and surgical strike. We never lost the ability to advise or to fight. We stayed engaged. We have experience in the lethal battlespaces, but we have stayed connected to our AOR and never lost the ability to do the special warfare mission that our regiment was designed to do.

SW: We keep hearing the words **relationships and reputation. That seems to be key to your success, why is that important?**

McDowell: We have all heard a lot about the rebalance to Asia and the refocus on the Pacific. The 1st SFG(A) never left the Pacific. We have

always seen it is a vital region and have enjoyed the opportunity to operate in an area that has exemplified Special Forces conducting special warfare. The best part is that success is often built on reputation and relationships and we have been blessed to be aligned to the same geographical area for nearly 56 years. The Special Forces tab and the gold flash on our Berets have long served as far and near recognition symbols of excellence to our friends and one of concern for our adversaries.

Relationships matter, and they can make all the difference in the world. We have learned that more often than not, you are going to find yourself in places where you need to leverage a relationship to gain or maintain access and placement in order to complete the mission you have been given. Our relationships enable us, the Special Forces, to be in places and accomplish tasks that are simply out of the reach of our conventional force brothers.

The Soldiers in the 1st SFG(A) are expected to create the conditions, meet the right people and maintain the access and placement in Asia that will enable our senior leaders, military and civilian, to know that they have a strategic weapon, the Green Beret, in country X, that is able to deliver ground truth, execute operations with the skills and equipment that he showed up with, and keep us ahead of our adversaries — the 1st SFG(A) takes this responsibility seriously.

In the past 90 days I have had the privilege to see Green Berets leverage relationships in crisis, build capacity and capability in a local government that had lost everything in a typhoon, and advise and assist fellow warriors in a conflict that would result in more than 200 enemy dead and nearly 30 friendly warriors killed in action.

In Zamboanga, the Government of the Philippines found itself in the midst of an uprising that rapidly went out of control. In the ensuing 21 days, there would be more than 100,000 people internally displaced, entire villages burned to the ground, more than 185 people taken hostage and used as human shields, and the massing of Philippine Special Operations Forces, who had been trained by Green Berets, from around the country who were sent into Zamboanga in order to secure the hostages and eliminate the threat.

As the crisis was unfolding, the reputation of our forces and the capabilities that we possessed to the President of the Philippines to make a visit to the Joint Operations Center being run by Green Berets one of his first stops. There, he gained ground truth that helped him and his senior leaders develop a plan.

The connectivity and relationships that the Green Berets had with those SOF units and those military and civilian senior leaders pro-

vided critical reach-back and situational awareness to the Embassy and to the Commander of U.S. Forces Pacific. It enabled Green Berets to facilitate the first delivery of humanitarian assistance/disaster relief to those who had been displaced; it provided information that directly enabled the Ambassador to determine how the U.S. could help and how he needed to work with the Philippine President; and lastly it would serve as a validation to many, as to the success of what Green Berets had spent the previous 11 years doing.

With and through others may not always be sexy, but it is a force multiplier that builds a network; ensures access and placement when we may need it the most; and is a significant factor in our nation's ability to defeat the anti-access/area-denial efforts that are employed by our adversaries.

These relationships that existed prior to Zamboanga were not only strengthened in crisis they further solidified a reputation that has been in place for many more years than most of us have been wearing this uniform.

Over the next five days, we would see Green Berets, Civil Affairs and Combat Control Teams taking a leading role in opening up airfields, organizing chaos, facilitating the stand up of local governments, relaying critical ground truth to the JTF Commander and the U.S. Ambassador; and providing aid to thousands of people who had lost everything in a matter of minutes.

You can go nearly anywhere in Asia and you will be greeted as a friend; however, just like in the United States, if they know you personally, they are more willing to help you out and do things with you that will help you make mission. In Asia, by continuously going there and understanding those relationships, we are the force that can be counted on to always make mission. We know that one of the young Soldiers we work with on a JCET today, will be someone who is going to be very important in just a few years to our senior leadership at PACOM and SOCOM. We have never forgotten that our relationships and reputation in the PACOM AOR enable us to get past the initial 'Who are you, why are you here?' They help us rapidly get on with the mission at hand.

and with, our new partners. The 1st SFG(A) constantly works hard to maintain those relationships over the years so that we rarely find ourselves "proving our worth", we walk into the relationship and rapidly become part of the solution.

SW: For the past 11 years, 1st Special Forces Group has been a large part of the success in OEF-P. In relation to the phases of warfare, where are we at in OEF-P?

McDowell: At this point, we have begun to transition the mission to civil authorities, or Phase 5. We are proud of our success, although very much unsung, it has met the objectives of defeating the threats to our nation, isolating the transnational terrorist capability and building capacity and capability in our brothers to secure peace in the southern Philippines while working towards a credible defense. Over the next year we will continue to transition the mission from one of primarily counterterrorism in the south to one of foreign internal defense, institutional

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One of the comments made by the Commander of the Joint Special Operations Group-Philippines, the unit that was charged with the majority of fighting in Zamboanga, was that the success of his unit was due to the excellent training that 1st SFG(A) Soldiers had provided since the unit was stood up in 2001. He further stated that he was grateful that the partnership in training had continued as Green Beret liaison coordination elements remained connected with his units, providing advice, during the crisis.

The reputation of the Green Berets would once again play out when 1st SFG(A) Soldiers were among the very first to respond to the largest recorded typhoon in Philippine history. When we inserted four Green Berets and a Combat Control Team onto an airfield that still had bodies floating in the ocean and laying in the streets, the one host-nation SEAL, who had been sent by his country, with other Philippine Soldiers, to help restore order to the place, immediately saw the shoulder patches of the Green Berets; came up to their location and told them that he was glad they were there.

Johnson: As the Group command sergeant major, I have personally witnessed the importance of long-term and new relationships with every team I have visited in the AOR. I have watched my young sergeants talk to senior officers or people in the embassy as if they have known them their whole lives. That isn't the case. That sergeant may have just met that individual, but someone on the team had the bona fides that got them in the door and allowed them to begin building the relationship. Our Soldiers don't have to start at ground zero. They start with an established relationship and then continue to create the conditions for the next ODA to be regarded as a friend.

McDowell: While these kinds of relationships are not new to Special Forces, it has been phenomenal to watch. It takes you back to Robin Sage. At Robin Sage, we all had to work hard to get into the G-base and we had to continuously prove ourselves until one day we were accepted as equals and then we were able to accomplish the impossible, through

development and building capacity and capability in the Philippine SOF. We will maintain the relationships that have been earned in combat and further developed in training. We will demonstrate our resolve to have a strong partnership that moves forward together. We will ensure that we maintain the relationships that support the PACOM Commanders Theater Campaign Plan and expand our successes in operating in the Human Domain in Asia.

SW: What is next for the U.S. Special Forces in the Philippines and those relationships you have built?

McDowell: Currently being discussed between our governments is something referred to as the Increased Rotational Presence. For most Department of Defense forces, this will actually mean increased exercises in the Philippines. For SOF, it is more or less a transition from what we have done for 11 years in the Southern Philippines, to a more structured, capability-based, institutional-development relationship with Philippine SOF outside of

the Joint Operational Area. The Filipinos are very sensitive to the appearance of U.S. forces establishing bases and thus we are going to leverage TSCP events and our habitual training relationships with Philippine SOF to design a future that sees us working shoulder to shoulder for many years to come.

SW: As the commander of JSOTF-P? How would you rate performance of U.S. forces in the Philippines?

McDowell: We have been executing counterterrorism operations with our Philippine counterparts for more than 11 years. It's been predominantly an advise-and-assist mission. Our forces have been critical in establishing and developing the capabilities and capacity in the Philippine Armed Forces to engage terrorist elements located in the Southern Philippines. We have strengthened the local government units through our work with the Philippine National Police Special Action Forces and the myriad of partners located on the U.S. Country Team. And we have consistently demonstrated our concern and support for the people of the Philippines, which has resulted in one of the most successful FID/CT efforts every undertaken by the U.S. military.

The Philippine Government has created an Internal Peace and Security Plan to increase the capability/capacity of local government units. They are working with the local police, leveraging the capabilities of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police Special Action Forces, to demonstrate to the people of Mindanao that they can have a say in controlling their own destiny and taking care of their own people. In many areas we are seeing the LGUs and the local population pushing away the lawlessness that has existed for so long.

SW: How has the SF role in OEF-P evolved and where and how did we make the biggest strides?

Johnson: Speaking from a historic perspective, I think that we came here with a pretty solid plan. We had to look at what they needed and work within their rules and laws. We identified the problem set, and a lot of it is tied to development. The people of the Southern Philippines really just want hope for a better future. The terrorists down in those regions have capitalized on the lawless region holding the local residents hostages in a sense. As we came in and brought the military force to them and increased their capacity, they were able to create an environment of security, which allows us to do development projects.



SITE SURVEY Command Sgt. Maj. Brian Johnson assesses the relief efforts at the airport in Tacloban, which was where the typhoon made landfall, to determine if additional JSOTF-P assistance is needed. The airport is serving as the main staging area for aid delivery and for refugees seeking evacuation. U.S. Army photo.

It allowed the Philippine Government to work and do projects that created the space for development. It empowered them to push back against the insurgents who have wanted to terrorize the country.

Some of the biggest things I've seen is the creation of standards within the Philippine Armed Forces. Before our presence, the Philippine Marine Corps was very heavy-handed because that was they believed was necessary for success. They would go in and try to get people to do certain things and acted in a very heavy-handed manner. When they saw the success of applying the right amount of military power to the right amount of civic action in the development of these townships and barangays, it didn't take long before they were nominating their own projects. They were going into towns, doing their own assessments and finding funding for their own projects and not relying on us to do those things. As those steps progressed further, that snow balled into where we are today — enabling the civil authorities. The military has set the conditions so that they can turn the security of the region over to the civil authorities. The local government and police can now ensure the safety of their people in numerous areas in the southern Philippines. In the military sense, they have grasped the importance of being more than just a combat unit. They can do counter-insurgency. They can do messaging. They can add civil action to the military solution.

SW: In the recent typhoon that devastated the Philippines, why do you feel that SOF was so successful in such a disaster?

McDowell: We were successful because of relationships and the understanding of what it means to actually get involved with the people who are around you. We were able to combine the skills of the Green Berets, CA, MISO, intel and aviation to tailor 3-to-8 man teams, put them on the ground and then let them accomplish the mission through mission command. Even though we were here for the JSOTF-P mission, it was very easy for us to configure effective and efficient units that could move anywhere in the region to affect the commander's intent.

Johnson: When I got onto the airfield at Tacloban, I linked up with Capt. Trinidad, a Philippine SEAL from the Naval Special Operations Group, whom I knew and had trained with many years earlier. Capt. Trinidad had been put in charge of all ground operations in the area. Tacloban was the most devastated area in the region that had been hit by the typhoon. Capt. Trinidad and I had instant recognition and trust. We both knew what we were capable of and we were able to get to work. As he saw my other Soldiers, who were wearing the Special Forces shoulder patch, he knew he could approach them as well to get help and solutions that would make a terrible situation better. **SW**